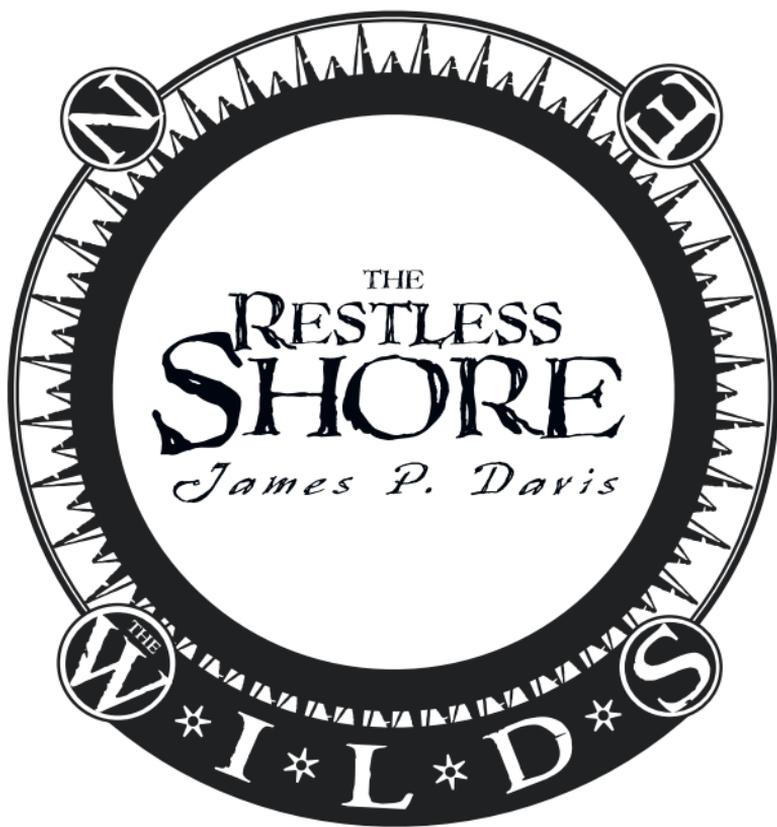


FORGOTTEN REALMS



CHAPTER ONE

*10 Flamerule, the Year of the
Heretic's Rampage (1473 DR)
Caidris, Akanûl*

The little town of Caidris was quiet long before sunset. The farmers had hidden themselves and their families away, leaving soldiers and sellswords to the kind of harvest that common working folk wished little to do with. Sharpened swords had replaced old plows, and the chatter of a lively market square had quieted to the occasional clink of well-worn armor and booted footsteps on dusty hard-packed streets.

Under a darkening sky, on the front porch of an old farmhouse with boarded windows, Uthalion considered the distant shadows of the southern horizon. Fields of grain waved in the wind, bending toward him as heavy clouds rolled northward, rumbling with thunder and flashing with lightning. He kept his breath slow and even, his eyes

narrowed and watchful. He could not banish the coiled tension in his muscles, the aching readiness to react, stand, and perform the duty for which he had been recruited. His stomach twisted at the thought, but his determination never wavered.

Absently he twirled a band of gold around his left ring finger, running his thumb over the tiny scratches in the imperfect bend of a once perfect loop. It had been two weeks since he'd left Airspur with promises to his wife and newborn daughter of a safe return and coin enough to leave the realm of Akanûl for good. He had spun stories of his grandfather's farm in Tethyr, of wide fields and ample work. Yet the only story his wife would recall, the only promise she would hold him to, was that he never take up the sword again.

He sighed and unhooked the long sword on his belt, a new blade placed in his hands by a dying man three days—three endless days of marching—before. He hated the weapon and the broken promise he saw in its finely sharpened edge. Even more than that, he loathed the responsibility his acceptance of the sword signified.

“Captain?”

The word was repeated before Uthalion realized he was being spoken to. He was not yet accustomed to the title and eager to be rid of it as soon as possible. A half-elf stood at the end of the porch, his sword drawn and eyeing the southern approach warily.

“Yes, Brindani?”

“The last of the townsfolk have been secured, doors are boarded up, and livestock have been locked away until . . .” Brindani's voice momentarily trailed off as both men spied the first pitch black clouds reaching the far end of town “Until the storm passes,” he finished.

Uthalion studied the half-elf's face for several breaths, seeing through the stoic façade to the spark of fear in the soldier's eyes and the breath he slowly forced from the tightness

of his chest. In that moment Uthalion hated the half-elf, but only briefly—a flash of malice that urged him to be cruel, to mock the young warrior who'd signed on for glory and story. Brindani's friends, also brash and eager for the gold a good fight might bring, had fallen three days ago, their bodies broken and left for carrion in the ruins of old Tohrepur.

Growls of thunder drew his attention back to the storm. The black clouds stretched from east to west as if they would swallow the entire world. Uthalion could still imagine the deep well from which they'd burst and flowed into the sky like a geyser of pure shadow. The Keepers of the Cerulean Sign, mystic warriors bound to the destruction of agents of the Abolethic Sovereignty, had stuck their swords in where they weren't wanted and had gotten more than they'd bargained for.

The unnatural storm was the least of their worries now. The Keepers were all dead as far as Uthalion knew, leaving their underpaid mercenaries to clean up the mess. Three days the black clouds had chased them across the Mere-That-Was; three days and counting for the last defenders of Tohrepur to fall.

"Are the men in place?" he asked Brindani who nodded, speechless. "We'll maintain a wide, even circle, closing slowly and converging here."

Soldiers took their positions in the distance, barely visible in the sudden and early night, their blades flashing in the long streaks of lightning. Beyond their evenly spaced line, shambling over the southern rise and backlit by the lightning storm, the last citizens of Tohrepur, thralls to abolethic masters, crested the hill. They walked awkwardly, many struggling to make their twisted limbs obey basic commands, their bones either horribly changed or gone altogether. The thralls' throats stretched and distended, producing only gurgling sounds as the servitors tried to speak, tried to find their lost voices.

Brindani gasped, staring as the horde pushed on into Caidris. His blade dipped, and he took a step backward. Uthalion descended the porch steps and grabbed the half-elf's shoulder firmly.

"Just do the work," he said, shouting to be heard above the thunder and howling wind. "Keep moving, don't think, and do your job."

"They're people," Brindani said, unable to look away from the grisly crowd. "They're just people."

Uthalion released the half-elf's shoulder and drew the dead captain's long sword, stretching his neck and calming nerves that had waited too long for the storm to come, for his work to arrive.

"Yes. And when you order that first round of drinks after all this is said and done," he replied, eyeing the sorcerous storm with a determined stare, "you remember what you just said before you tell the tale. You remember it very well."

The thunder in the storm buzzed through the town, an alien voice whispering dark words that tingled like magic on the air. Uthalion could feel that magic descending from the clouds, caressing his cheek with silky tendrils of suggestion. Nausea spun his stomach, matching the racing course of his thoughts. He advanced, ignoring the brief pangs of anxiety that accompanied the start of any battle. The dark swallowed him, leaving him in a black void with only the dusty road beneath his boots to keep him grounded.

He paused several feet from the farmhouse as the babbling voices of Tohrefpur's host grew louder, gurgling screams that chased the thunder and echoed somewhere in his memory. The sudden sense of having done it all before was overwhelming, and he turned, looking back at the farmhouse and the open door banging in the wind. Khault stood on the porch carrying a glowing lantern. Khault, the brave farmer who'd invited Uthalion's men to stay and rest in Caidris,

and who had volunteered to help when he'd heard news of the coming disaster.

With measured steps, Khault descended the porch steps as if in a trance, his eyes fixed on the advancing thralls as they clashed with the mercenaries at the end of the road. In his free hand he held an old axe, its blade glowing dully in the orange light of his lantern.

"You should be inside!" Uthalion shouted over the thunder. But Khault did not answer and did not stop. Panic took the captain in an icy grip, and he strode forward, grabbing the farmer's shoulders and shaking him, "Why? Why risk it? Think of your family! Why would you leave them alone in this?"

Khault merely stared, the orange light digging deep shadows in the man's face.

Shouts caught Uthalion's attention as the soldiers' circle formation closed, edging nearer to the farmhouse. He shouted back, instructing his men, though the words were too familiar, like a script playing itself out and using his voice without his consent. He stopped and tried to remember, placing a hand on his head as if he could pluck the memory free through scalp and bone.

"We can't all be heroes, Uthalion!" Khault called out, walking into the dark, toward the flash of distant blades and the shining eyes of Tohrepur's people. "But you should not judge us for trying!"

"Nonsense!" Uthalion yelled back, blinking in the wind and turning in circles, narrowing his eyes as the struggling memory crawled sluggishly to the forefront of his mind, "Follow orders," he muttered. "Just do the job."

"Don't be naïve, Captain," Brindani whispered, though the half-elf was nowhere to be seen. "Wake up!"

Shadows twisted as a figure shuffled toward him from the right. He raised his long sword, abandoning confusion for the simple clarity of combat. Lightning blazed across

the sky, sparkling in the drooping eye of a young boy whose twin mouths opened wide to reveal multiple rows of needle-sharp teeth.

“Wake up. . . .”



6 Mirtul, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)
The Spur Forest, Akanûl, South of Airspur

Uthalion woke with a gasp to find himself lying on the forest floor, staring up into a thick canopy of trees. Moonlight streamed through the leaves as he blinked in a daze, the nightmare slowly retreating into the murky depths of his thoughts. Sitting up, he saw that his knife and the rabbit he'd snared earlier were gone, but his silver ring, plain and unassuming, lay on the ground where it had slipped from his finger. As he set it back in its place, the cold metal soothing against his skin, he breathed evenly and wiped the sweat from his brow.

The soft crackle and glow of the campfire behind him and the smell of cooking rabbit eased his mind, and he sat for a long moment, the drying blood of the rabbit sticky on his fingers, staring into a middle distance that held only the promise of a quiet darkness. He could only have been asleep for an hour or so. His left hand, bearing the silver ring, clenched into a fist that would not soon release the simple loop.

At length he stood up. A small stream ran along the edge of the grove, and he lowered his hands into the cool waters, careful not to lose the ring on his finger.

“Did you sleep well?” Vaasurri asked, and Uthalion closed his eyes.

“You know better,” he said as he focused on removing the blood from his hands.

“I suppose,” the killoren replied. “But I always hold out hope.”

Uthalion nodded with as much finality as the gesture could convey. Despite the magic of the ring, he was tired. It had been six years since he'd walked away from Caidris and nearly three weeks since he'd last had a night's sleep. The dream was always the same, carrying him back to Khault's little farmhouse and the dark basement where he and his men had ridden out the aboleth's storm. The repetition of the dream, night after night, invading his sleep had given him splitting headaches for months—until he'd found the enchanted ring. Its silver shine was dull compared to the gold band it had replaced.

Uthalion watched as thin clouds of dirt and blood bloomed in the clear water of the stream. Maryna, his wife, would have teased him for the blood on his shirt, her skill at cleaning a kill much better than his own. He would have taken her jibes graciously, complimenting her wonderful cooking in a sneaky attempt to escape the duty himself. But she'd known his tricks quite well. He paused and held his breath, shutting out the memory of her smile, before drying his hands on his tunic. He sighed in exasperation.

Vaasurri entered the light of the campfire, bearing his strange, knowing smile that seemed almost permanent at times. With his light green skin traced with leaf-line veins and deep emerald eyes, the killoren's features were like extensions of the forest itself. Uthalion could only barely recall a few faces that he knew as well as Vaasurri's.

“What did he say this time?” Vaasuri asked.

“Can't a man wash his hands in peace?” he asked.

“Apparently not,” Vaasurri answered, an edge of frustration creeping into the fey's voice that Uthalion had not expected.

“Oh, I disagree. I've seen it happen you know,” he replied, turning and staring up into the trees in mock wistfulness.

He took a deep cleansing breath. “A simple man washing his hands—not a care in the world and not a soul to disturb him. That’s just good living. Quiet moment. Clean water and maybe a bluebird singing nearby.”

“Point taken,” Vaasurri said with a half-smile, his eyes gleaming in the firelight.

“Apparently not,” Uthalion added and approached the fire.

Uthalion sat, his stomach grumbling in anticipation as he stared into the steaming pot over the campfire and put behind him the unexpected sleep—and the dream that came with it.

“Well, you needed the rest. It’s been almost—” Vaasurri began.

“Not now, Vaas,” Uthalion said, not taking his eyes away from the stew. “Truly. Not now.”

“As you wish,” the killoren said, and he filled two wooden bowls in silence.

Uthalion’s hand shook slightly as he took his portion of the evening’s meal. His nerves were still on edge, the dream not yet done with them. That night in Caidris had been only one of several in the Keepers’ campaign, though it had been one of the last. Unfortunately, his memory had served him better the farther they’d gotten away from Tohrefur. What little he could recall of that city was fragmented by flashes of sorcerous light and heavy fogs of limitless darkness. He’d seen little of the aboleth itself and was grateful for that. The dying captain’s face was a blur, though his sword of rank remained with Uthalion, its details carved deeply into the fabric of his mind. Beyond that only the screams remained. And something else: a haunting, half-heard sound almost like singing.

Uthalion ate slowly and in silence, the sinuous melody hiding somewhere in his thoughts and taunting him behind the dying cries of the Keepers and honest sellswords. Each

time he removed the silver ring and allowed himself to succumb to slumber, the nightmare worsened. The ring's magic maintained a sense of being well rested, though it could do little for the rigors of simply being conscious. Vaasurri had told him that dreams were necessary—in Uthalion's case a necessary evil—for the mind to remain balanced and whole. Uthalion had pushed the limits of that balance each time, swearing he'd not remove the ring so soon the next time. The night's rest had been an accident, and the nightmare had proved itself more than able to make up for lost time.

He shook his head and flexed his hand, willing the dream away and breathing in the fresh air of the forest. He'd told little of his tale to Vaasurri, and though his curiosity was boundless, the killoren had never pushed too hard for the details.

The bile of the nightmare crept up in his throat. He set his bowl aside and turned to the grove, the circle that he and Vaasurri had cultivated over the years as a focus for what the killoren called the energy of the Feywild. The Spur Forest had been affected as much as any part of the world by the Spellplague of years past, but it had also been infected by the Sovereignty. The aboleths' minions and magic had descended upon the northern city of Airspur almost fifty years before, their nightmarish power spilling into the Spur before being turned away. Vaasurri claimed the circle could begin a cycle of healing for the forest, restore some of what the aboleths had turned wrong.

The spot they had chosen was greener than it had been before. Flowers bloomed, and Vaasurri's small herb garden had begun to flourish. Uthalion sighed, thankful for such an oasis and the good work it gave him to be proud of. He buried the dream until the next dreaded moment when the ring would slip away along with the world he had carefully cultivated around him. An old notebook lay wrapped in his cloak, containing all the knowledge he'd discovered

in the Spur since choosing to live away from the crowds of Akanûl's cities.

Uthalion had once promised Maryna a fine home and a beautiful garden. Having grown up on a farm in Tethyr, he knew quite a lot about chickens and potatoes, but had been lacking in the knowledge to deliver on his promise. He still meant to keep it one day, somehow.

He looked over his shoulder at Vaasuri, also staring into the Spur, and noticed the killoren's curved bone sword leaning against a nearby tree.

"Any reason we're joined by your dragon's tooth, Vaas?" he asked.

The killoren's expression changed, like a shadow crawling across the moon, and he seemed wilder than a moment ago, an animal smelling something on the wind.

"I've just had a feeling, is all," Vaasurri replied, his eyes piercing the dark like a predator.

"A *feeling*?" Uthalion said and sat forward, raising an eyebrow in interest and mentally cataloguing the location of his own weapons. "Sometimes I think your feelings are better than a scout's eyewitness report. Anything specific?"

"Not just yet," the killoren said. He reached for the bone sword, its smooth blade covered in dark images of hunting beasts and cunning prey. "Could be anything, but I do not think it natural in any sense of the word . . . At least, not in any sense that the world recognizes as natural anymore."

Uthalion considered Vaasurri's words, frowning his brow. "No bears or dragons then."

A piercing howl interrupted his attempt at a jest, and both of them sat bolt upright, their eyes wide. Their ears focused on the trailing edge of the unnatural sound that existed somewhere between the howl of a wolf and the cry of a man. The hair on Uthalion's neck stood on end, and a shudder passed through his shoulders, chilling him to the core.

"That was not a bear," he said, getting to his feet.

“Nor a dragon,” the killoren replied and stood as well. His sword was at the ready though the howl had come from some distance away to the north.

“Small favors,” Uthalion muttered quietly as he went to uncover his sword and bow. He took up his light leather armor and listened for the howl to return, almost longing for it. Something strangely beautiful—and horrifyingly familiar—existed in the sound. That hint of beauty gave him more cause to be alarmed than any fang or claw he might have imagined a heartbeat ago.

The howl came again, joined by others. The sounds of the forest ceased as the unseen predators called to one another, marking their positions. A dull ache pressed against Uthalion’s temples as the howls faded away. Large predators were not entirely uncommon in the Spur, but newcomers warranted investigation.

Uthalion nodded to Vaasurri, who returned the gesture and disappeared into the forest. A well-practiced strategy had begun, and despite the disturbance of the peaceful night, Uthalion was eager to leave behind thoughts of the dream—and his dear Maryna. He ran into the forest, following paths by memory rather than cleared ground or landmark, until the unearthly green of the forest surrounded him.



Between the twisted roots of trees and the reaching thorns of low bushes, Ghaelya flowed through the forest like a mountain stream, graceful and powerful despite being well outside the city streets she called home. Tired of running and annoyed at keeping an eye over her shoulder for pursuit, she kept a steady hand on the broadsword at her belt. Though every instinct told her to turn and fight, she could not let hot emotion threaten what little chance she’d been given to make things right.

Ahead of her, Brindani quietly led the way through the Spur, his boots barely a whisper in the murky depths of the forest. Crouching low in a shallow ravine, he turned and motioned for her to remain still as he listened and scanned the area. Brindani's half-elf eyes pierced the night far better than her own, and he knew the forest paths almost as well as she knew the streets and towers of Airspur. But he'd taken them in one small circle already, and she was beginning to doubt his confidence.

"Are we close?" she asked.

He turned to her and ran a hand through his shoulder-length black hair, his hazel eyes sparkling pinpoints in the dark.

"Hard to say," he answered. "As well as I know the forest, Uthalion knows it far better. He could have concealed the grove where I spoke with him last . . . Or perhaps he's moved on."

"Moved on?" she replied with not a little anger, fighting to keep her voice low.

"It is possible, though I very much doubt it."

Ghaelya sighed and bit back a useless retort. She sat on her haunches and ran a hand over the smooth skin of her scalp, wiping away tiny beads of sweat before they dripped into her eyes. Much as she regretted taking on a companion in her quest, she needed a guide to help speed her journey across the wilds of Akanûl. She had no time to waste. Brindani seemed capable enough, but he claimed his friend Uthalion knew more than he about the lands beyond the Spur.

She used the moment's rest to adjust her armor. In the gaps between the straps and armored protection, her sea foam green skin was cooled by the night air. Faint blue lines of energy traced the surface of her flesh in unique, serpentine patterns.

She traced the blue pattern on the back of her hand absently, proud of the watery element that marked her

soul and her skin, though acutely aware as always of being an outsider, even among her own kind. In Airspur, elements of wind and storm took dominance among the majority of the genasi. She smiled slightly. She enjoyed being different—rebellious in her own way—though it had proven a hindrance, the night her sister, Tessaeril, had been taken.

Brindani waved to her, and they continued into the ravine, alert for signs of movement on either side. Strange beasts had been trailing them for days, always one step behind and gaining. Thankfully, they had seen no sign of the hounds' masters, a group of strange monks calling themselves the Choir. Along with her sister, the Choir had disappeared from Airspur a tenday before, but had returned as mysteriously as they'd first appeared.

Howls sounded in the distance, and she tensed, a painful ache erupting in her temples at the sound of the hunting beasts. They were getting nearer, closing their circles and gaining momentum in the Spur rather than losing it. The pain subsided, but she feared its return. The beasts' baying voices burrowed into her thoughts and clawed at memories that seemed both false and familiar all at once, like an old dream or forgotten tune fighting to break free of her deeper mind.

Brindani stopped, frozen in place, and cocked his head to listen. Angry at her own distraction, Ghaelya drew her broadsword and eyed the edges of the ravine. Glancing at the half-elf, she found him staring at her intently. Though he didn't say a word, his quiet nod spoke volumes—after all the miles they'd run and the difficult terrain they'd crossed, the beasts had finally caught up.